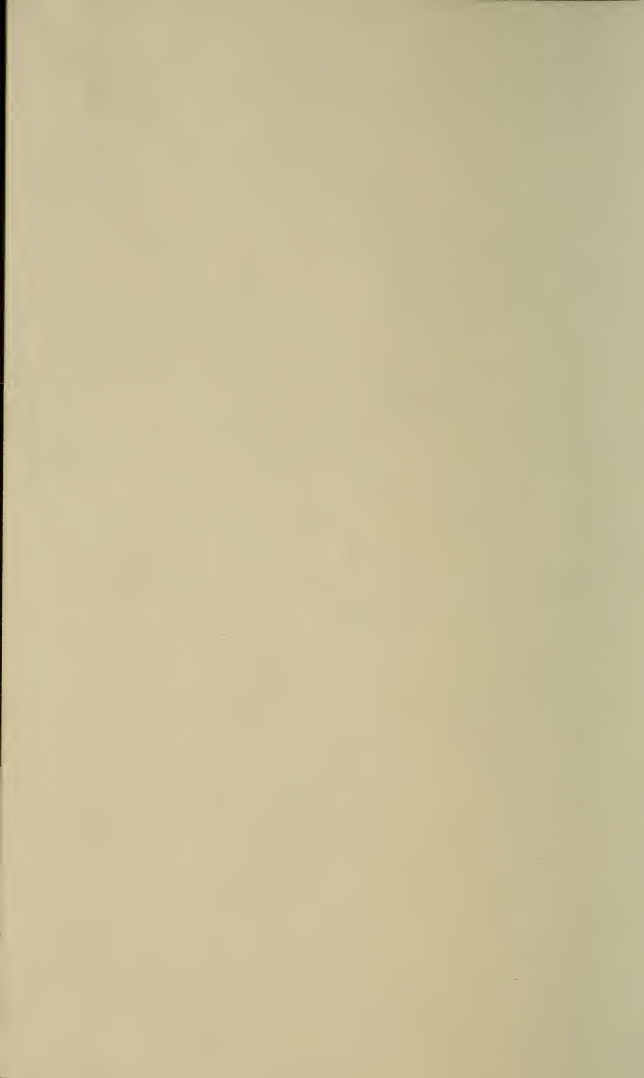


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MY LITTLE TOWN

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BY
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PUBLISHERS' NOTE

Appearing originally in *The Atlantic Monthly* under the title "Christmas in Littleville," this small sketch, by its quiet charm and its intimate humaneness, made an appeal to such a wide circle that its publication in an accessible form naturally follows. The courtesy of the Proprietors of *The Atlantic Monthly* in facilitating this reprint is cordially acknowledged by the Publishers.

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WHEN Christmas came to me, a little girl, it came all musical with myriad voices. From the time when the rhythm of Prayer-book seasons swung us into Advent, and I began to patter my Nativity collects, my waking and sleeping hours grew strange with mystery. In silent winter dawns, those hours when only old men and little children are awake and seeing visions, the gemmed blackness of my window squares would pale and throb with light, brightening till the sky broke

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apart, and there poured forth the infinite throngs of angels, and the air rang with song that set me sobbing. Since then I have gone the way of all grown-ups. I cannot hear the Christmas angels now. All the world must wander forth from the sheltering faith of our fathers, and the way back home is curious to find. Yet perhaps we do rediscover the little quiet place, not knowing it because the light upon its windows is no longer the unfaltering light of dawn. They are stern folk who do not turn homeward to childhood at Christmas-time. In Littleville, this is no hard matter, among people who, having tended their cosset lambs, find it not hard to believe that angels sang to shepherds; or who, familiar

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friends with their beasts, find it not strange that a God should have been born in a stable; or who, close-knit as one family in the snugness and permanence of village life, find it not difficult to believe in a gospel of goodwill; for Littleville lies as open to the stars as ever did Bethlehem.

In Littleville, Christmas is Christmas still, and we do not do the poor day to death. In fact, whatever our business in Littleville, sorrowing or merry-making, being born or dying, we manage it somehow without fret. And thus our Christmas. The first signs of holiday are in the decorations of the editor's office, which, shaped and sized like a dry-goods box, suddenly

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goes flaunting in garniture of green and red paper-chains from which depend dumpy scarlet bells of all sizes ; through this network at nightfall the smoky glass lamps against the dusky presses blink bravely. One window-sash is lined with Christmas cards that gleam with frost-work and ruddy fires. I confess that those cards, far more than better ones, have for me the Christmas magic. Christmas is a symbol, and a Christmas card should be symbolic ; that is saying it should be like the Christmas cards of my childhood, having house-windows of rosy mica and lawns of artificial frost-work.

If, as the *Littleville News* thus announces, Christmas is on the way, it behooves us to remember various du-

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ties. One afternoon, we of the Rectory look forth upon a procession that, in single file, and silhouetted against the snowy street, trudges on up to the church door. Each head is enveloped in a mob-cap, each form wears a sturdy apron, over each shoulder points a broom-handle bayonet-wise, as they march to duty, the good women of our Littleville congregation, come to clean the church. For two hours the ancient building rocks to their energy, until at last the carpet shows the seams of each well-worn patch, each smoky chimney gleams like crystal, and in the vestry-room the face of each pictured bishop atop of his pontifical lawn is washed clean of cobwebs, and our old

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church that has seen a hundred Christmases is ready for one more.

Meanwhile, this morning, we of the Rectory have done a little cleaning of our own. For some reason we always feel a little shaky when our housekeeping is to be inspected by Littleville eyes, and so we have secretly burnished the tea-kettle and given an extra rub to the nickelware of the kitchen stove; for our plot is to decoy our good ladies to refreshment after labour. We have discovered that to a Littleville housekeeper a cup of tea in the middle of the afternoon savours of the Sybarite, but we argue that Littleville is always more at ease when it enters by the back door, and that tea administered in the kitchen will perhaps meet with

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expressed welcome rather than with unexpressed rebuke; success proves our machinations excusable.

Christmas comes marching on still nearer, as we know when one morning we come flying from our various corners at the boom of a jovial voice that summons us. Down below there is the clatter of an ox-team and of a great cart, from which trails the Sunday-School Christmas tree, and on which our Christmas greens are heaped high, to be deposited presently on our porch by the big farmer-vestryman. Piled branches block egress for several days, but we don't care, because of the pleasant pungency borne in to us in Christmasy whiffs.

The brigade that bore the brooms

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now presses into service to decorate the church, but among them is never a man. It is a very strange thing about men that there never are any. Plenty of little boy-babies seem to be born; they do not seem to die off either, — yet there never are any men. Says Mattie, the outspoken,—as we sit about the roaring stove, in the rear of the church, stripping, bunching, and tying, our hands reddened with the frost still on the green twigs, — says Mattie, while she twines with green the hoops she has wound for every Christmas in thirty years, ‘If I could have made a man for this church I’d have made one long ago.’ Men or no, we somehow clamber up the ladders, despite the handicap of fears and petti-

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coats. And at last chancel and windows are festooned to our liking. Also we have arranged the white hangings and the white altar-cloth against the Day of the Nativity; and over the worn, soiled places, for our hangings are old and threadbare, we have pinned sprays of the blood-red holly.

Not in the church preparations alone is the spirit of Christmas abroad in Littleville. On a fairy morning of sun misted by snow-flurries, my marketing is arrested by the sight and sound of a merry company. Over the hill and down the street they troop, the school children who have gone out to bring in the school Christmas tree. The big boys drag it, and the smaller fry go dancing to right and left and rear, funny bob-

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bing little figures in clumsy, home-made duds. As they go, they sing patriotic songs, for these are all they know. It is one of the tender ironies of life that their shrill voices should be piping 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' in celebration of the birth of peace; but it is no matter about the words, for hearts and feet are keeping tune to Christmas.

Not for the youngsters alone is the holiday cheer at work. As I turn to tug my grocery-basket up the slope, I see our aged bus-driver, who has counted his fourscore of Christmases, jump nimbly from his seat, seize a sled, and amid the plaudits from the post-office door and the hardware store, cast himself prone upon it, and, rheumatic feet

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aloft, go skimming down the glistening curve.

When Christmas week comes upon us, our little Rectory grows full of unaccustomed bustle. First comes the meeting of the Sunday-School teachers to discuss the apportionment of the ten dollars we have to expend on the Christmas Eve celebration. This must provide a gift for each of our sixteen scholars, as well as candy and oranges. Also the five babies, who have by baptism attested their intention of becoming scholars, must receive their fruit from the Christmas tree, all unwitting neophytes though they still are.

The matter of the gift-giving is ever a painful one for the Rector, for it seems that the naughty, those who have

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appeared for a single Sunday before Christmas, plainly on booty bent, must be omitted from the list. If even I, remembering the endless dish-washings of the little farm-girls, the endless corn-rows and potato-hills of the little bare-foot boys, find it difficult to demand of them the long trudge to Sunday School, if even I find it difficult not to be lenient on Christmas, for his part the Rector finds it well-nigh impossible to temper his mercy with justice; we have to exercise a shameful severity toward him in order to restrain his hand from diving deep into the lean ministerial pocket and Christmas-ing every one of them.

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve we assemble in the church to prepare

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the tree, and now we actually have the help of a man, the busy Littleville editor, who is also our busy Sunday-School Superintendent. We find him sunk in that despair which we know, for him, is a necessity before invention. Therefore we sympathize with his dejection, retaining our confidence in his resourcefulness. It is the Christmas tree that does not suit him, — in truth it is as scraggly as a plucked fowl, — but presently he has fallen upon it, is grafting with clever wire branch after branch, until the tree stands remade to his satisfaction. However, it topples in perverse fashion, and I am sent flying for the Rectory clothes-line, by means of which we moor the trunk

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securely to the knob of the vestry-room door.

We are at last ready to begin laboriously decorating the branches with packages to be in an hour laboriously cut down, patiently skewering oranges with a threaded darning-kneedle, attaching tarnished tinsel angels and ornaments and candles; patiently and humbly, for the superintendent has in him the soul of an idealist, and is not easy to satisfy. But at last, as the long shadows begin to steal out on us from beneath the gallery, he dismisses us, to a busy two hours in the Rectory before we reassemble.

In our absence, gift-bearing visitors have taken advantage of the gloaming to leave curious packages upon our

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doorstep. There is a generous bag containing a supply of Mattie's sour-cream cookies. There is a dressed cockerel suspended by his long legs from the door-bell. Safely to the right of the door-mat stands a grape-basket twined with ground pine, and in it are fresh eggs, each encased in a fluted cap of green paper, each looking forth with a sketched face, whimsical and merry. We recognise in the pictured faces the clever hand of a neighbouring farm-wife, we surmise the donor of the chicken, but we are quite at a loss to place the responsibility for a generous sack of apples, potatoes and cabbages discovered at the back door. Later inquiry wins no information, so that we strongly suspect that gift as coming

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from without our Anglican fold, in fact as due to a Baptist neighbour, rendered thus indiscriminating by the Christmas spirit.

But we, too, have our gifts to make, and must go hastening with them now along the dusky streets. Littleville gives us of its own, and we too carry our home-made gifts. We know Littleville pride, Littleville delicacy, and we offer nothing machine-made, store-new, but carry little boxes of candy of our own manufacture. We tie one on the bell-rope in the dark church vestibule where the sexton boy may find it. Others we leave on dark doorsteps, ringing the bell and then scurrying off. It is fun playing Santa Claus in Littleville. We hurry home in time for a

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hasty supper before we go back to church for the evening festival.

Early as we are, the superintendent is earlier. We find him suspended in air on top of the pipe-organ. A boy below is handing him a chair on which he clammers. From this perilous vantage-point he is able to bring forth and hang up in its proper Eastern corner the Star of Bethlehem. The Sunday School could not possibly celebrate Christmas without the Star of Bethlehem. I do not know what hand first made it, but our Star of Bethlehem is as old as tradition itself. It is formed of a cigar-box on end. In the lid is a star-shaped opening covered with red mica, and within is a candle, whose

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lighted rays simulate the rosy luminary of the Orient.

Presently the babies are arriving. They come in soap-boxes fastened to sleds which are drawn into the church. Above a box bearing the inscription 'Larkin's Soaps,' or 'Have you a little fairy in your home?' one sees a sweet little wind-rosy face. The Rector has to come down from the vestry-room in his cassock to welcome the babies, as they are gradually undone from their cocoon-like wrappings.

The church is filling fast now, with a rustling, whispering, observant congregation. Our scholars sit a-row in the front pews; their heads present a comical zigzag line, the boys' locks slicked smooth by the hearty family

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brush that hangs by the kitchen sink, and the little girls' tresses frizzed to wantonness. The choir have taken their seats, crowding the railed platform by the organ until it looks like an over-full robin's nest. The choir give hearty assistance to our feeble piping of the carols, for the front pews are frankly intent upon the tree rather than upon the singing or upon the Rector's reading of Luke's age-old story.

He is old and wise, the Rector, and there is no long tarrying before we reach the Christmas-tree part of our programme. As the superintendent jumps nimbly forward to light the candles, the sixteen scholars rise and defile along the chancel-steps. They face us there, ranged strictly according

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to height, from a blushing hobbledehoy boy to a sprite of a tiny girl, so eager-eyed and fairy-footed that she has to be forcibly pinned to the chancel carpet by the decorous hand of an elder sister, run out along the backs that intervene between them.

The children have been instructed to sing 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' while the tree is being lighted. They begin each stanza bravely enough, but the last line trails to almost nothingness, for as the candles gleam, one after one, head after head turns to the tree, exactly like a row of dominoes filliped over by a finger. The line is at last restored to the front pew, and we watch our superintendent's every motion, as, slowly and impressively, he clips from

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the tree each gift we had so securely attached.

We find it a little hard to recognize our names when a 'Master' or 'Miss' precedes, followed by our full baptismal designation and surname, we who are ordinarily merely Joe or Bessie to all the town; but shoved forward by mates and teacher, each child called rises, receives his gift, and turning, faces the congregation with the trophy held well in evidence toward the craning parental heads in the rear of the church.

It is all very decorous. If perhaps an irrepressible jumping-jack suddenly springs aloft in the front pew, or if there is a smothered tattoo on a drum, or a baby crows to the music of a new

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rattle, the Rector himself is the first to smile, despite the solemnity of his surplice. Yet we of his household know how dear to his heart is the ordered seemliness of divine service in the consecrated building, so that a thrill of apprehension runs through the family consciousness at the wholly unexpected turn the gift-giving takes at the close.

The presents are all distributed, the candy has gone about the congregation, oranges are gleaming in small hands, but I am aware that there is still a sense of expectation throughout the church. Abruptly the superintendent disappears into the vestry. His back is toward us when he re-enters, dragging what appears to be a seated statue,

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veiled in wrappings which are reverently undone. The superintendent stands back, murmuring three words, 'For our Rector.' All Littleville sits breathless, beaming; we are breathless, too, for what will he say to the unexpected thing? There, beside the Rector, with the silvered scholarly head above the hieratic white of the flowing surplice, beside him in the very sacredness of the chancel there stands, swaying, with deep reverberant chime of the springs, an enormous red plush rocking-chair!

Only an instant the Rector hesitates, then the twinkle conquers, and the tenderness. Sometimes he uses words a bit too long for Littleville, but not now. He thanks his people in phrases

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simple and grave, as befit the house of God, warm and kind, as befit the hearts that are also God's house. And I reflect that the Christian faith is a homely faith, and comprehendeth all homely things. Then simply, as one to whom such transitions are natural as breath, the Rector passes from the gift he has received to that Greater Gift. He speaks as one whose faith in the Christmas creed has never faltered. He talks, as a little child, to little children, about a baby God. And I, too, at this moment, listen as a child. The faith of one's fathers! It is a little thatched home to which perforce the gypsy brain returns at Christmas-time. I, too, go a-dreaming of Bethlehem's plain and Bethlehem's melodies as the

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Rector's voice ceases, and we rise to sing, in tones that ring to the battered rafters of our old church, the Gloria in Excelsis.

The Benediction then, and the home-going. Little heads to be done into hoods or caps with the earlaps snugly down, sleepy babies to be tucked up on their sleds, tops and candy to be stowed away in parental pockets, — and all the little ones and all the big ones of our Littleville bidding us good-night and merry Christmas. Down the dark hill-streets they trundle, our friends, with their lanterns that bob and gleam and disappear as the voices die away into the night.

A little while I linger on the Rectory doorstep all alone. Within are the rud-

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dy rooms of our wee Rectory-home. Before me are the great branches fruited with stars, and beyond the branches the deep Christmas sky above our Littleville. Again a little girl, I think about the herald angels. Not now for me those riven skies, not now for me a far, faint plain of Bethlehem; but is it not a Christmas gift from one unseen that I still may hear the Christmas angels singing in humble human hearts?

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